

# MEMORANDUM

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Date: 1/23/08

Speaking: Jackie Huie and Dawn Williams

Subject: In support of Second Chance Legislation on behalf of Michael Johnson 159608

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Good morning. My name is Jackie Huie and I'm here with my sister, Dawn Williams.

We appreciate the chance to speak on behalf of Juvenile Offenders sent to adult prisons. But mostly, we appreciate the chance to speak on behalf of someone exceptional - our brother, Michael Johnson, serving a Life sentence at Muskegon Correctional Facility.

This is Michael when he went to prison in 1980 (SHOW PHOTO). He was 17 and a junior in High School. He pled guilty to 2<sup>nd</sup> Degree Murder with the understanding that after 10 years he'd have the chance to be released, should he meet all criteria. After the sentence, he received Commutation Guidelines stating he could serve up to 18 years in prison.

As tragic as this was for a young boy to face, Michael accepted his punishment and understood the magnitude of what he'd done, as well as the lives destroyed - namely the victim, Sue Ellen Machemer, her family, and our family.

For the first time in his young life, Michael was on his own. But from day one, he took his punishment seriously and inside his harsh new world, worked toward becoming a better, more responsible person.

In prison, he earned his GED, completed Group Counseling and got a job. He graduated from Montcalm Community College with an Associates Degree, earned a Paralegal Degree, and learned a Vocational Trade. He served as Editor for Prison Newspapers, "The Oracle" and "The Factor"- multiple winner of the Michigan Penal Press Award.

In his news columns, he wrote about the importance of not wasting time in prison waiting for another chance, but working to earn that chance. He put his words into action as the Jaycee President and created the Domino's Pizza Reward Project - an incentive program that recognized inmate's who went 12 months ticket-free.

Michael successfully completed RG&C Recommended Group Psychotherapy and was commended by the program's Chief Psychologist, who wrote that Michael was one of the most productive and insightful members within the group, adding that his work usually exceeded the program expectations.

A real turning point came in 1996 when Sue Ellen's parents went to visit Michael. Mel and

Ellen Machemer had questions that only Michael could answer. They went back to visit him several times and over time, decided on their own that the troubled teen who took their daughter's life was long gone.

They saw in Michael what we see – a mature, caring man, deserving of a second chance. They have since joined MDOC Officials, State Senators and Representatives, Forensic Psychologists, and Community Leaders who have met Michael and support his release in letters to the Parole Board. Additionally, the Machemers have met with local Prosecutors, Judges and Politicians to see what could be done.

**Everyone is just as frustrated as we are - that in an inconsistent, broken correctional system, NONE of this matters.**

This is Michael today, in a family photo taken at MCF (SHOW FAMILY PHOTO). He's now 45 years old. Incarcerated for 28 years, he's been misconduct free for the past 22 years. He has a home waiting for him, a good job, and the essential support of family and friends – all prepared to support a smooth, successful transition.

Michael has been reviewed by the Parole Board 5 times. In 2001, I attended his 4<sup>th</sup> Review, a Parole Board Interview. Traveling with me, was Ellen Machemer. We walked away feeling positive and hopeful, especially when Michael's Resident Counselor said, "Of all people, Michael should be released. No good can come from keeping him in prison."

30 days later, while inmates, being denied parole, opened letters simply stating: "NO INTEREST," Michael received a very unusual letter with words of encouragement:

"The parole board acknowledges the many positive accomplishments you've made throughout the years of incarceration. At this time the parole board has voted not to advance your case to the public hearing stage of the lifer law process. Your next review will be in five years. The parole board urges your continued positive adjustments."

We later learned that Michael had received 2 Votes for release, but not a Majority Vote. Because of the letter from the Parole Board, our hopes were high for the next Review. For the next 5 years Michael and our family focused on those encouraging words. We stayed positive and continued to work hard.

But in 2006 the parole board denied Michael at the file review and **did not grant him an interview**. No reasons were given. Only a letter with two words – "NO INTEREST."

Today we're here to ask – has our brother been thrown away? Did the impulsive mistake of a 17-year old mean his life is over, no matter what he does? The Sentencing Judge in 1980 didn't intend for Michael to spend the rest of his life in prison. But 28 years later, there he is.

And he's not alone. Every year, thousands of Juvenile Lifers enter the MDOC. Those that work hard to improve themselves are not recognized for their efforts, maturity and growth, but only for their crimes when they were juveniles.

We urge you to support this legislation. It won't ensure parole, but it will give exceptional

juvenile lifers, like our brother, the second chance they so deserve.

Thank you.

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